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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging major reform reports that name reading, writing, speaking, and listening as the most essential skills in the work of any school, this brochure discusses important first steps for school boards pursuing excellence in the language arts. These concrete suggestions are grouped under five broad directives: (1) declare that the highly skilled use of English is a priority in the district, (2) find ways to reduce composition class size, (3) establish a climate and provide the means for professional development of English language arts teachers, (4) provide services and facilities that support the teaching of the English language arts, and (5) recognize achievements of students and teachers. (HTH)

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Incentives for Excellence

What School Board Members Can Do to Encourage Excellence in Their English Language Arts Programs

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NCTE National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801

A Message from the President of NCTE:

If I were a school board member, I would feel perplexed and even put upon by the various task forces, committees, and commissions that have issued prescriptions for what is allegedly ailing the American schools. Of course, it is school board members and school administrators who will be required to make the key decisions about what will be done to promote excellence in education.

Yours will be hard decisions. The various reform reports do not always agree with each other, and board members will have to choose which reports and recommendations to heed.

However, all the reports agree on the importance of improved English and language arts programs in school reform. Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are seen as the most essential skills in the work of any school. Real improvement in education will depend on vigorous, well-informed, carefully designed English language arts programs.

Inspired teachers are at the heart of your program. Your Englisn teachers need help and encouragement if the language arts program is to have maximum effect on your students. The National Council of Teachers of English has prepared this pamphlet to suggest how you can help English language arts teachers help themselves move toward excellence.

Teachers from all over the country have contributed ideas to the suggestions which follow. You and your staff members can certainly add to the list in view of local needs.

Many of the suggestions in this pamphlet are inexpensive and require relatively little effort. When school boards and administrators initiate one or more of these plans, they send English and language arts teachers an important message: "We care about you and what you are doing."

In presenting these Incentives for Excellence, NCTE hopes to help you support English language arts teachers in their work. I urge you to join with us in taking action for excellence in English.

Sincerely,

Stephen Tchudi

Stephen Tchudi
Michigan State University
President, National Council of Teachers of English

What School Board Members Can Do

1. Declare that high skill in the uses of English is a priority in the school district.

Many students and many teachers perceive that all the subjects, somehow, are equal in importance. They are not. Competence in the use of language—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—is the basis for all other learning. A subject is not fully known until the learner can talk or write about it in his or her own words. A principal cause of failure of college students and young people in the workplace is inability to handle language effectively. Almost invariably, achievement in life is accompanied by high achievement in language.

It follows that all teachers of all subjects have a major responsibility to foster growth in language skills. While the English language arts teacher is a specialist trained to show students how to read, write, listen, and speak, all other teachers must share in the task. Studies have shown that, outside of English classes, most teachers are not fulfilling their responsibility to foster growth in language skill.

The school board can take the most important and necessary first step toward excellence in English by declaring that development of high skill in the uses of English is a priority in the school district. At the same time the board can declare that all teachers must help achieve this first priority.

2. Find ways to reduce the size of classes in which composition is taught.

The teaching of writing is the great unfinished work of American education. Under present conditions, it is not possible for all students to learn to write well nor is it possible to teach writing as well as teachers know how to teach it. In *High School*, the report of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Ernest L. Boyer, former U.S. Commissioner of Education wrote:

> "The most frequent reason given for the failure to teach writing is the extraordinary demands it places on the teacher's time. Today most English teachers meet five classes daily, with 25 to 30 students each. If the teacher gives one writing assignment every week to each student, he or she spends, at a minimum, more than 20 hours correcting papers."

For nearly fifty years, the National Council of Teachers of English has advocated that composition classes have no more than 25 students and that teachers have no more than four such classes. Similarly, at the elementary school, where the most fundamental work of all occurs in the teaching of writing, NCTE advocates no more than 25 students per classroom. Students must learn to write by writing, and their efforts to express themselves need and deserve the careful attention of their teachers.

These class size standards are important not because they benefit English language arts teachers, but because they make it possible to teach written composition so that *all* students can become competent and confident writers.

3. Establish a climate and provide the means for professional development of English language arts teachers.

With very modest expenditure, school boards can stimulate their English language arts teachers to become continuing learners. Teachers want professional growth for themselves and their colleagues. Among the possible activities by which school boards can encourage professional growth are these:

a. Provide effective inservice programming, particularly for subject-specific workshops, using local teacher talent as well as outside speakers of the teachers' choice.

b. Set up a travel fund so that numbers of teachers can receive at least partial support to attend state and national professional meetings.

c. Pay fees for teachers who wish to subscribe to professional journals of English language arts associations, state and national.

d. Develop a continuing education fund so that within a five-year period all teachers can return to summer school with district support for study of English and related disciplines.

e. Establish a system of part- or full-paid sabbaticals to permit teachers to undertake university study.

4. Provide services and facilities which will support the teaching of English language arts.

Effective teaching is hard work, and too much of that precious ingredient—time—is spent in getting to needed resources and materials or even in finding a place to plan and think. School boards can help by seeing that English language arts teachers have time, space, and resources to work efficiently and effectively.

a. Retain one or more district-wide consultants to foster professional growth, coordination of curriculum, and acquisition and use of professional materials.

b. In secondary schools, designate strong teachers as department heads and give them time to help other teachers.

c. Provide language arts workrooms to hold a professional library, files of language arts-related materials, and copying equipment.

d. Provide clerical assistance to English language arts teachers so they can spend more time working with students.

e. Provide elementary teachers with an hour of planning time each day.

f. Seek PTA or business funds to allow each English language arts teacher at least $50 per year for needed materials and books.

5. Recognize achievements of students and teachers.

The least costly but nonetheless important change in school practice is providing encouragement to teachers and students for work well done. Teachers increasingly feel that school board members and administrators don't care about the achievements of teachers and students. School boards can do a great deal to improve the psychological climate in which teachers work.

a. Through such means as honors assemblies, make full note of achievements of students who excel, such as those who are declared winners in the NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing Program, winners of local writing contests, or those who excel in speech and drama activities.

b. Establish ways to alert the press to achievements of students and teachers.

c. Create policies which support the professional activities of English language arts teachers in regional, state, and national associations.

d. Send personal notes to teachers and students who have achieved personal distinction.

e. Encourage creation of school or departmental newsletters so that news of the English language arts program can be delivered to the community.

f. Support establishment and continuation of student publications, such as literary magazines and poetry collections.

g. Set aside time on the board agenda to hear in detail about the progress and problems of the English language arts program.

NCTE will be grateful if school board members will welcome the study of these incentives for excellence as a beginning point in a local review of policies affecting the professional lives of English teachers. These suggestions have one ultimate goal: improved learning and teaching of the English language arts. There is no other purpose, and there is nothing more important for your schools.

NCTE will be happy to supply additional copies of this flyer as well as copies of other flyers listed below if you'll send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to NCTE Information Services.

For further reading

"The Essentials of English," National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.

"How to Help Your Child Become a Better Writer," National Council of Teachers of English, 1981. (also available in Spanish: "Como Ayudar A Su Niño A Escribir Mejor")

"The Essentials of Education," Organizations for the Essentials of Education, 1979.

"Standards for Basic Skills Writing Programs," National Council of Teachers of English, 1979.

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